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AUTHOR	Huffman, Dennis
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ABSTRACT

A study of the effectiveness of a language proficiency testing method using partial dictation is reported. The study used 60 undergraduate students at a Mexican university studying English as a second language under a traditional four-skills approach. The partial dictation exam was a combination of dictation and cloze procedure. The entire text is presented in an auditory version, and the printed version presented to students is only partial, with portions to be filled in by students. The decoding and encoding process tested was felt to both give students a feeling of achievement and test their global language proficiency. Grades on the partial dictation exam, final grades, and averages for diagnostic exams were compared statistically, and the method was found to be reliable enough to allow discontinuation of the more unwieldy and costly oral examination. Appendices include examiner instructions, two printed portions of the examination, and items from the diagnostic exams used. (MSE)

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TESTING FOR GLOBAL PROFICIENCY

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Dennis Huffman
Universidad Autónoma Chapingo

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Background

As an English teacher in Mexico for the last ten years, I have witnessed the changes from a specific component (phonology, syntax, lexicon) approach to language learning and testing (where language skills were developed linearly, beginning with listening/speaking and proceeding to reading/writing) to a global component approach. Different linguistic concepts such as "communicative competence," "cognitive code theory," "discourse analysis" and "the notional - functional approach" have become commonplace terms. However, the emphasis of these changes has been on writing textbooks, designing materials and promoting a variety of suggested teaching methodologies which has left the teacher to face the problem of how to evaluate students on a global proficiency level.

Valerian Potosvsky (1974:229) proposed that the ability to speak a language is "an end result of complex and mostly covert processes which constitute linguistic competence." He reasoned that in acquiring the ability to decode, the language learner must develop recognition knowledge, while to encode he must develop retrieval knowledge.

The question is how do we test our students' hidden mental processes. Accepting Potovsky's definition of linguistic competence as a process of decoding and encoding language, we designed a series of structured oral exams (see Appendix A) for the Language Center at the Autonomous University of Chapingo. These exams consist in a series of questions and commands to elicit certain responses from the students. At the beginning level, both Spanish and English are used. The students are required to decode information as the examiner presents certain situations orally in the form of mini-conversations

or short texts, such as registration forms or restaurant menus. The students are also required to encode information orally as they respond to the examiner's questions or commands, and in writing as they fill out forms or complete cloze exercises.

These exams correlate moderately with the averages of the students' diagnostic exams and with their final grades, 0.6380 and 0.7775 respectively, using Pearson's coefficient correlation formula (Weinberg and Goldberg 1982: 97). However, the structured oral exams are costly in terms of time, and the level of subjectivity involved in this type of exam varies greatly from teacher to teacher.

The scoring method employed with these exams took into account four general areas:

1. Fluency: the ability of the student to respond to a series of questions with a reasonable amount of ease, while maintaining a normal flow of communication.

2. Correct usage of the language: what a native speaker would consider normal in terms of which structures and vocabulary items are used in specific situations.

3. Correct grammar: allowing for those errors that a native speaker of English might make under similar stress (as in a test situation).

4. Pronunciation: taking into account the intonation, rhythm, blending of sounds and stress markers which a native speaker would use.

The specific percentage each of these four areas had in computing the grade was left to the discretion of the individual examiner.

This high degree of subjectivity and the time required to administer the structured oral exam prompted a search for other means of evaluating global proficiency. The decision was made to investigate partial dictations as a viable alternative.

In this type of exam, a combination of dictation and cloze procedure, all of the material is presented in an auditory version and part of it in a printed form (see appendices B and C). The portions of the text that are missing in the printed version are the criterion parts where the student must write down what is heard; hence, though all of the material is presented in an auditory form, only part of it is dictated for the student to write down.

The factors which influence the difficulty of this type of exam, according to Oller (1979:271) are: 1) the conceptual difficulty of the word sequence; 2) the overall speed of presentation; 3) the length of sequences of material that are presented between the pauses; 4) the signal-to-noise ratio; 5) the number of times the text is presented; 6) the dialect and enunciation of the speaker and the dialect the hearer is most familiar with; and 7) a miscellany of other factors.

It was felt that if the results from this type of exam correlated favorably with other means of evaluation already established in our courses, four of the most persistant problems in foreign language testing as expressed by Carrol (1980:520) would be resolved:

1. The problem of validity: measuring what is intended to be evaluated.

2. The problem of scope: assessing the varied components of foreign language competence and skill.

3. The problem of efficiency: obtaining the best results within the limits of time and resources available for constructing and administering the tests.

4. The problem of how tests relate to the wider context of instruction: enhancing instruction rather than distorting it through undesirable feedback effects.

Given a course with an oral emphasis, the students' ability to decode information presented aurally and encode it in writing should give them a high sense of achievement and at the same time test their global proficiency.

Purpose of the Study

Taking into account previous studies done by Spolsky (1975) and Oller (1979), pragmatic tests such as partial dictations should intercorrelate with other methods of evaluation regardless of which traditionally recognized skill (listening, speaking, reading or writing) is specifically utilized. In order to verify these findings the following hypothesis was formulated:

1. Scores from partial dictations compare favorably with other means of evaluating student achievement in courses where traditional "four skills" approaches are utilized.

Procedure

The study sample consisted of 60 undergraduate students at the beginning level in our oral classes at the Language Center of the Autonomous University of Chapingo. Their ages ranged from 16 to 19 years, and they were studying English under a "four skills" approach with each skill reinforcing the others.

The procedure adopted was to pre-test 100 students at the beginning of their courses in order to select only those who obtained a score lower than 80 (minimum passing grade) on a scale from 1 to 100. This selection was due to the supposition that not all of the students who registered for beginning level courses were actually at that level. The initial scores from the partial dictation tests proved this to be true. A little over one-third of the students tested were rejected due to high scores. To make the statistical analysis easier, the last three students whose scores were under the minimum were also disqualified, leaving 60 examinees.

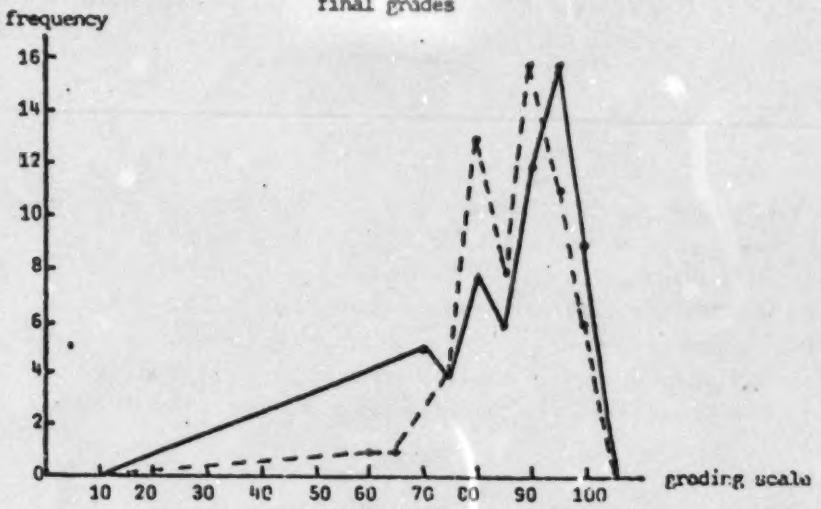
During their courses, the students were given several opportunities to practise the mechanisms of taking partial dictations. This was done in order to accustom the students to the tape recorder, the material and the mental process of listening to the tape, reading

the incomplete text, selecting the missing information and then writing it in the spaces provided. The students first read the incomplete written version before listening to the taped complete version. The taped material was played once while the students reread the text. Then, the material was played a second time with pauses in order to allow time for the students to complete their texts. These pauses or breaks are inserted at natural breakpoints, and the length of each pause is determined by the time it takes the examiner to subvocalize the spelling of each sequence of verbal material twice. Finally, the students listened to the tape a third time with pauses in order to check their work.

The same partial dictation exams were applied at the end of the course, using a scoring method which was quite similar to those used with standard dictations: one point for each correct word in the correct sequence. No points were subtracted for words that were misspelled but clearly recognizable as the correct form. Using Stig Johannson's (1973:15) general guidelines, errors which would not affect pronunciation, provided that the word was clearly recognizable and distinct from other words with similar spellings, were disregarded. These scores were then converted to a grading scale from 1 to 100 in order to compare them with the students' scores from their final course grades and the averages of their diagnostic exams. Final course grades were calculated in the following manner: 1) 35 possible points for class participation; 2) 30 possible points for diagnostic exams; 3) 20 possible points for the final achievement test and 4) 15 possible points for homework assignments. The diagnostic exams consisted in discrete point and semi-discrete point multiple-choice items, sentence-completion items, cloze exercises, sentence-ordering exercises, multiple-choice reference items and multiple-choice oral comprehension items (see Appendix D).

Given these scores, point distribution graphs were done to compare them (see graphs 1 and 2).

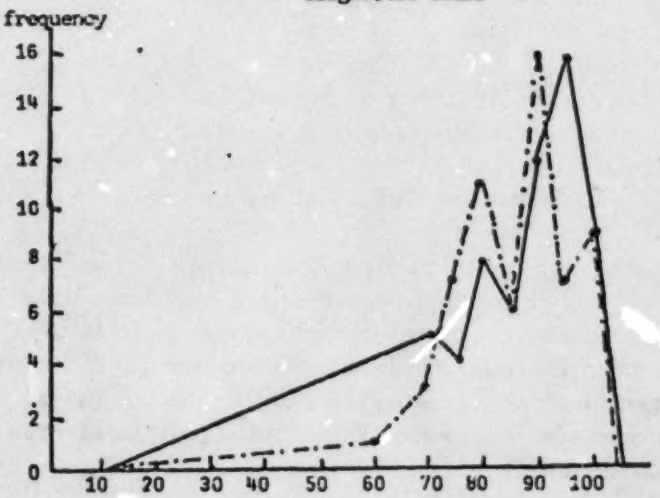
Graph 1 Point distribution for partial dictations and final grades



——— frequency distribution for the partial dictation exam

– – – frequency distribution for final grades

Graph 2 Point distribution for partial dictations and diagnostic exams



——— frequency distribution for the partial dictation exam

– · – · – frequency distribution for the averages of diagnostic exams

Finally, Pearson's coefficient correlation formula was used to calculate the degree of inter correlation (Weinburg and Goldberg 1982).

Results

The frequency distribution for the partial dictation exams, the final grades, and the averages for the diagnostic exams showed very similar point distributions. The coefficient correlation between final grades and partial dictation exams was 0.6627, and 0.4881 between these and the averages of the diagnostic exams. Both of these correlations show a moderately positive linear relationship which corresponds to previous comparisons with our structured oral exams.

Conclusion

The results from this investigation led the researcher to consider the variances between the structured oral exam and the partial dictation not sufficient to continue using the oral exam. Partial dictations, a technique devised by Johannson (1973) in Sweden, was proposed instead.

In all of the case studies the same students were tested by the same examiners, under similar conditions with respect to the material and classroom facilities. These results were then compared with the same students' performance during their courses.

Given the difficulty of preparing and administering structured oral exams as a standard departmental procedure for evaluating global proficiency, the intercorrelation between partial dictations and other means of evaluating student achievement, and the overall facility of preparing and administering partial dictation exams, the researcher recommends the use of these as a practical means for evaluating linguistic competence.

Appendix A

UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA CHAPINGO
DIRECCION ACADEMICA
CENTRO DE IDIOMAS

STRUCTURED ORAL EXAM FOR LEVEL ONE

DESIGNED BY: GRETCHEN WINTERS

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE EXAMINER.

During the test, keep in mind the need for flexibility. The patterns to be tested are a guideline to follow and not the only ones to be used. We want to see if the students can ask questions as well as answer them.

Therefore, please follow the format presented and at the same time allow for variation according to the students' responses. Use as near a normal rhythm, stress and intonation as possible. Do not alter your speech if the students do not understand, but rather change the content of the question in which you elicit a similar response.

Explain to the students that part of the exam requires them to understand a statement or question in English in order to respond, and at times they will be given instructions in Spanish to respond in English.

1. Greetings, introductions and personal information.

1.1 Teacher: Hi. I'm _____.

Student: (Gives name)

Teacher: Nice to meet you.

Student: (Response)

1.2 Teacher: Pídeme mi número telefónico.

Student: (Response)

Teacher: Di tu número telefónico.

Student: (Response)

1.3 Teacher: Pídeme mi dirección.

Student: (Response)

Teacher: Di tu dirección.

1.4 Teacher: Where are you from?

Student: (Response)

Teacher: What department are you in?

Student: (Response)

1.5 Teacher: Preséntame a esta persona. (Refer to a photograph)

Student: (Response)

1.6 Teacher: (Give the student a registration form) Por favor, llena esta forma.

Student: (Fills out the form in English)

1.7 Teacher: Pregúntame a qué me dedico.

Student: (Response)

Teacher: I'm a teacher, what about you?

Student: (Response)

Teacher: What does your father do?

Student: (Response)

1.8 Teacher: Who's that? (Refer to another photograph)

Student: (Response)

Teacher: What does he/she do?

Student: (Response)

1.9 Teacher: Excuse me, is this your pen? (Indicate either your or the student's pen)

Student: (Response)

2. Family relationships.

2.1 Teacher: (Show the picture of a family) This is a picture of my family. Pregúntame de mi familia. (Elicit "Who's that?", "What's his/her name?", "Who are they?" etc.)

Student: (Response)

2.2 Teacher: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Student: (Response)

Teacher: How old are they?

Student: (Response)

Note: Level one also covers the following catagories: LOCATIONS, SUGGESTIONS, PRICES, FREE TIME ACTIVITIES and LIKES AND DISLIKES.

Appendix B

UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA CHAPINGO
DIRECCION ACADEMICA
CENTRO DE IDIOMAS

1A.4/PD/1,2,3,4,5,6//ST/LRW/881

DICTADO PARCIAL

Este es un examen de su habilidad de comprender y escribir algo que se le presente oralmente. Es un dictado parcial. Escuchará el texto 3 veces. La primera vez es para comprensión global. Solamente escuche y lea el texto sin escribir. Durante la segunda vez, habrá pausas para que ud. pueda escribir lo que falta para completar el diálogo. Se escuchará el texto una vez más para corregir lo que ud. ha escrito. Debe escribir exactamente lo que escuche.

Tomiko: Hi, Tony. How are you?

Tony: O.K. And you?

Tomiko: I'm fine. _____?

_____?

Tony: Uh-huh. Sit down.

Tomiko: Who's that?

Tony: My brother Nelson.

Tomiko: That's _____

_____?

Tony: N-E-L-S-O-N. And that's his wife, Julia.

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Tomiko: Oh, he's married? How old is he?

Tony: Twenty-seven. Are you married?

Tomiko: No. I'm not. _____?

Tony: _____. _____?

Tomiko: No.

Appendix C

UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA CHAPINGO
DIRECCION ACADEMICA
CENTRO DE IDIOMAS

1B.4/PD/7,8,9,10,11,12//ST/LRW/11-81

Este es un examen de su habilidad de comprender y escribir algo que se le presente oralmente. Es un dictado parcial. Escuchará el texto 3 veces. La primera vez es para comprensión global. Solamente escuche y lea el texto sin escribir. Durante la segunda vez, habrá pausas para que ud. pueda escribir lo que falta para completar el diálogo. Se escuchará el texto una vez más para corregir lo que ud. ha escrito. Debe escribir exactamente lo que escuche.

Tomiko invites Jeanette to a movie.

Tomiko: What do you do Jeanette?

Jeanette: _____.

_____.

Tomiko: You work and study, and you're a housewife too?

Where do you find the time?

Jeanette: Oh, I don't know. I even have some free time.

Tomiko: _____?

Jeanette: I read and I go to the movies.

Tomiko: Oh, I like movies too. Would you like to go tomorrow?

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Jeanette: _____.

_____.

But I'd like to go sometime. How often do you go?

Tomiko: About twice a month.

Appendix D

ITEMS FROM DIAGNOSTIC EXAMS - LEVEL I

1. Discrete point multiple-choice items

1. A: Who's that?

   B: _____

   a. María Sánchez. b. She's 20. c. She's from Mexico.

2. A: I'm Tony.

   B: _____

   a. That's OK. b. What about you? c. Nice to meet you.

2. Semi-discrete point, multiple-choice items

Jeanette: Hi, Tony.

Tony: Hi, Jeanette. 1. a. Who / b. How / c. What are you?

Jeanette: Fine, thanks. And you?

Tony: OK. Sit down.

Jeanette: Are those pictures of your family?

Tony: Uh-huh. 2. a. That's / b. Who's / c. Where's my mother.

Jeanette: Really? 3. a. Who / b. What / c. How old is she?

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Tony: She 4. a. is / b. are / c. does only 48. And here are my two brothers, Nelson and Mario.

3. Semi-discrete point, sentence-completion items

A) What _____?

B) I _____ an engineer.

A) Oh, _____?

B) Yeah. I _____ for a construction company.

4. Multiple-choice cloze items

Complete the letter with these words.

I	in	s	an	you
are	hello	One	His	from

Dear Magda,

I'm sorry I can't write more often, but I'm very busy. I'm OK, but I really miss _____ and Anwar.

My classes at the Institute _____ fine. I'm in English 2A and _____ have a very good teacher. His name' _____ Jim Chapman and he's from California. _____ classes are really

interesting. The other students _____

the class are OK too. They're _____ Mexico,

Brazil, Italy, Japan, and the Ivory Coast. _____'s

a nurse, one's a secretary _____ I

think two are university students.

Say _____ to Anwar for me and write

soon.

Love,

Ali

5. Sentence Ordering

Put the conversation in order.

_____ New York. What do you do?

__2__ Hi. I'm Jim.

_____ Los Angeles. What about you?

__1__ My name's Sue.

_____ Really? My father's a teacher too.

_____ Nice to meet you. Where are you from?

_____ I'm a teacher.

6. Multiple-choice reference items

After reading a text the students choose the correct answers.

1. In sentence (2) you refers to

   a. Anwar b. Ali c. Magda

2. In sentence (5) he refers to

   a. Ali b. the teacher c. Anwar

7. Multiple-choice, oral comprehension items

You will hear Ricardo's part of the conversation. Circle the correct answers for Gloria's part of the conversation.

1. Gloria:

   a. Uh-huh. b. Yes, I'm a teacher.

   c. No, I'm a student.

2. Gloria:

   a. Mexico. b. 32.

   c. English 3.

3. Gloria:

   a. I'm Gloria López. b. What's your name?

   c. What course are you in?

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